Pandemic and Social Distancing

The Racial and Olfactory Origin of Social Distancing

Introduction

Among the measures to contain the new coronavirus, Covid-19, 'social distancing' has emerged as a buzzword. Politicians, journalists, commentators, news readers, experts and ordinary citizens use the term blithely. Social distancing, or maintaining a physical space between people, is generally presented as one of a number of public-health, unmedicated practices to prevent disseminating this highly contagious disease. Wearing a mask, isolating infected patients, quarantine, school closures, the prohibition of cultural, sporting or religious gatherings, total confinement of the population and absolute prohibition against leaving one's home are among the many other measures. However, scrutinising the term from a sociological perspective reveals that 'social distancing' is very different from the concept of 'physical distancing', which is in fact what these measures are all about.

Historically, the meaning of the term 'social distancing' is the differentiation between social classes or racial groups. A theory developed by the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1912), social distancing is the result of conscious or unconscious policies and behaviours that confer an inferior social status to individuals or groups who

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are considered to represent a risk—to 'us', 'our' community, 'our' nation. It cannot be determined with a ruler. Our socialisation leads us to distinguish the noble from the trivial, the precious from the unimportant, the pure from the impure. But among the causes of social distancing is smell.

Since their first contact with black people, Western explorers and slave traders have used accusations of a bad smell to justify social distancing from and hatred of blacks. After observing the construction of olfactory stereotypes against blacks since the pre-industrial era, Le Guerer (1992) concluded that 'odour thus becomes an instrument and justification for or the sign of a racial, social and in the end, moral rejection' (1922: 27). Olfaction stereotypes were so engrained in Western societies that Simmel, one of the first sociologists to study odour, argued that human societies were prevented from uniting because of olfactory bigotry:

It would appear impossible for the Negro ever to be accepted into high society in North America because of his body odour and the forebody and profound mutual aversion that has existed between Germans and Jews have been attributed to the same cause (Simmel 1912: 36).

While revisiting the history of physical distancing and social distancing, this article attempts to show how the term 'social distancing' evolved and wound up being used without question. A sociological scrutiny of 'social distancing' reveals the anti-black, racism-loaded history of the term, and is a lesson in the importance of questioning buzzwords before embracing them.

From physical distancing to social distancing

Since time immemorial, physical distancing as a strategy to minimise contagion or preserve purity has been practised by human societies. One of the oldest written references to physical distancing occurs in the Bible, in Leviticus 15: 20–23. Following the Jewish tradition, it was alleged that menstruation rendered a woman unclean and might infect anybody who came into direct or indirect physical contact with her. She would need to stay in isolation for seven days to become pure again:

When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening.

Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean and anything she sits on will be unclean.

Whoever touches her bed must wash his clothes and bathe with water and he will be unclean till evening.

Whoever touches anything she sits on must wash his clothes and bathe with water and he will be unclean till evening.

Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, he will be unclean till evening.

Besides its alleged function to separate the impure from the pure, physical distancing has also been practised throughout history for medical reasons. In the early history of human societies, ill people were separated from the healthy until they were well. Another early form of physical distancing was quarantine. During the fourteenth century, the 'Black Death' spread quickly through Europe and became one of the deadliest plague pandemics. The disease started in the Far East and appeared in Europe in 1346. Five to ten years later, the plague exploded in Europe. Millions of persons were killed and society was considerably transformed. Italy was one of the leading countries affected by the disease. Contagion doctrines developed there included two crucial 'forms of public health control … municipal quarantine and isolation of the victims' (Hays 2009: 54).

In 1374, the Italian cities of Genoa and Venice started to determine the origin of incoming ships. The cities 'turned away any (ship) coming from infected areas' (Byrne 2008: 483). In 1377, the first maritime quarantine took place at the trading colony of Ragusa. The ships coming to Ragusa were ordered by law to anchor outside the port for a month, or forty days (a *quarantena*—the origin of the word 'quarantine'). In the meantime, the port officials scrutinised the travellers and cargo to detect any possible health menace. The quarantine law consisted of four requirements:

(1) That citizens or visitors from plague-endemic areas would not be admitted into Ragusa until they had first remained in isolation for one month;

(2) that no person from Ragusa was permitted go to the isolation area, under penalty of remaining there for 30 days;

(3) that persons not assigned by the Great Council to care for those being quarantined were not permitted to bring food to isolated persons, under penalty of remaining with them for 1 month; and

(4) that whoever did not observe these regulations would be fined and subjected to isolation for 1 month. (Sehdev 2002)

In October 1918, during the Spanish flu pandemic, Max C. Starkloff, a physician in charge of healthcare in St. Louis, Missouri (USA), implemented the closure of all public places and a ban on public gatherings of more than twenty people. His actions are credited as one of the earliest examples of physical distancing for medical reasons.

With the evolution of medicine and greater knowledge about managing disease in large populations, physical distancing has been perfected over time. The goal of physical distancing is to slow down the likelihood of touch between infected and uninfected people and thus reduce the health risk. Physical distancing is effective when the contagion is transmitted through coughing, sneezing, touching a contaminated surface or through airborne particles.

'Social distancing' was first named as a strategy to fight a pandemic by the World Health Organization in 2006, when avian flu started to kill people. According to experts from the WHO, avian flu had the potential to affect more than one billion people worldwide and in that case would leave authorities powerless to deal with the epidemic: stocks of antiviral drugs were insufficient in all countries and the first vaccines against the new disease would be ready, at best, in four to six months. The only weapon immediately available to slow this scourge was 'social distancing'. This term was used in WHO-recommended codes of emergency procedures to define all quarantine measures to minimise physical contact between individuals, such as bans on demonstrations and public meetings, restrictions on public transport travel, mandatory masks, etc. It was taken up by the media in articles reporting on how to behave in the face of a significant health crisis. An early example can be found in the French newspaper *L'Express* of 2 March 2006, in a text by Charles Gilbert, entitled '*On ne se touche plus*' (We no longer touch each other) (Xavier-Laurent Salvador 2020).

Three years later, with the emergence of the swine flu (H1N1) pandemic in 2009, the term 'social distancing' was further embedded in public usage. On this occasion, the WHO recommended social distancing and personal hygiene, as it did when the coronavirus pandemic broke out. Many countries then implemented containment measures for large populations over several weeks following these recommendations.

'Social distancing' has taken on the same meaning as physical distancing and yet its connotations are far more sinister. This is why a sociological intervention is necessary to shed light on these terms, which may help to avoid misinterpretation. We do this with a retrospective look at the racial and olfactory origins of social distancing.

The foetid smell of the ships

Although the victim of a disease had to go through the ordeal of isolation (or physical distancing), this practice was understood as a sanitary measure and was generally accepted by society. Even so, physical distancing brought prejudice, linked to race or social class. However, social distancing comes from the fear, hatred or disdain of a racial group or a social class, and its result is to diminish and marginalise them. Black people, starting with their history as African slaves, have been the most targeted social group for 'distancing'. One of the first stereotypes to justify this behaviour was the perceived or alleged foul smell of the slaves. The chattel slavery of Africans, who were hunted down like animals, shipped as cargo and sold as objects to slave-owners to work on plantations, is well known. When human beings are chained or incarcerated in large numbers in cramped spaces for long periods of time, having to relieve themselves in the same place, among the prone bodies of those suffering from dysentery, it is evident that they will not smell good. The smell emanating from the slave ships was notorious during the slave trade period.

> One particular focus was the stink generated by the cruel treatment of slaves on board the ships that transported them to the colonies. Ships became one of the key focuses of (…)

> The smell of slave ships was often remarked upon. Aboard one slave ship John Rilands, heir to a Jamaican plantation was forced to share his room with twenty-five African girls whose stench at times was almost beyond endurance. (Tullett 2015: 315–316)

The living conditions on board ships were so horrible for the enslaved Africans that, recounting Thomas Clarkson's experience on his second transatlantic voyage, Tullett (2016: 316) wrote: 'Thomas Clarkson described how "voracious fish were supposed to have followed the vessels from the coast of Africa … being allured by the stench" emitted by the blood and putrefaction of dead and dying slaves.'

The stereotype of black people having an offensive smell was perpetuated by later writers. Giving an overview of some accounts, Tullett (2016: 314) writes:

> During the period between 1750 and 1800, writers specified particular nations of Africans who were more or less odorous. For example, Buffon's natural history argued that 'those of Guinea are extremely ugly and have an insufferable stench' while 'those of Sofala and Mozambique are handsome and have no bad smell'. Similarly, Bryan Edwards and Daniel M'Kinnen noted, in their history of the British colonies in the West Indies, that it was remarkable that 'in all the Mandingoes, they are less disgusting in features and more free from a fetid smell, than any other Africans'.

Buffon (1785) and Virey (1826) give some accounts in the same vein: the 'Negroes' (from Angola or Cape Verde) 'smell so bad when heated and that the air of the places they have been remain infected for more than a quarter of an hour' (Buffon 1785 in Le Breton 2006: 298). Moreover, 'when the Negroes are under heavy sun, their skin is also covered with an oily and blackish sweat. It stains their skin. Their clothes exhale a very unpleasant leek smell' (Virey 1826: 111). Slave-owners who noticed the powerful smell never questioned the horrific living conditions of the slaves in their ships, nor did they consider the deplorable work conditions on the plantations that inevitably resulted in strong body odour. Anti-slavery authors, such as William Dickson, acknowledged that 'some negroes have a fetid smell'. By adding 'some', Dickson is an exception to the trend towards generalisation that characterised writers of that period. Moreover, he added: 'So has every man, more or less, who toils and sweats much, in a sultry climate and neglects bathing' (Dickson 1792: 81–2). Despite the writings of anti-slavery authors, the negative olfactory stereotypes continued. Long (1774) believed that the odour was innate and immutable, but did not mention the brutal treatment of Jamaican slaves, such as obliging them to eat foecal matter and treating their injuries with urine.

Several modern Western authors, such as Faulkner (1948), Dollard (1957) and Brink and Harris (1969), referred to the 'stench of nigger', which probably derived from poor hygiene, such as not bathing or not keeping 'decent human standards', leading them to 'live like pigs'. According to Dollard (1957), blacks wore excessive quantities of perfume to avoid racist prejudice. By doing so, following Dollard's analysis, they reinforced white prejudice: whites ended up believing that blacks smelled bad because they used cologne to excess. By making some whites uncomfortable, the black 'smell' took on aggressive racial

characteristics that led whites to keep their distance.

The concept of the 'foul odour' of black people was not limited to the West. It also reached some Asian countries like China, where anti-black racism is rampant. In 'From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism', Cheng (2011) reported some Chinese netizens using 'extreme racist language', denouncing Africans' presence in Guanzhou: 'It is a racial invasion!'; 'Public safety is gone!'; 'Are they becoming the 57th ethnic group?'; 'China is not a camp for refugees; our resources are already scant.' He did not mention the reference to odour but it was there: 'Not obeying law and order is their nature, not to mention their body odour!'; 'Go home, you African dogs! You are here only to share our businesses and our women!' (Cheng 2011: 567).

Some Chinese women in romantic relationships with Africans have been humiliated by Chinese men who believed that they had been manipulated by a racial cliché that overstates black men's virility at Chinese men's expense. This led to some web users attacking 'Chinese women involved with blacks in obscene language from a nationalist perspective, saying they brought shame to "our country" and "our ancestors" by sleeping with "ugly and smelly" blacks.' (Cheng 2017: 567)

The widespread belief in black olfactory stereotypes was also echoed by Lan (2017) in her book *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging:* 'Many of our African interviewees reported unpleasant experiences traveling on the bus when some Chinese covered their noses at the sight of Africans or avoided sitting beside them.' (Lan 2017: 32)

The intersection of smell and racial preconceptions allows us to see the historical process of social differentiation and social distancing. Thus, social distancing was constructed by the time of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the form of aversion to and disdain or suspicion of blackness, and has been perpetuated across generations and continents.

From the slave ships to the generalisation of social distancing

A particular odour that indicates an individual's belonging to a community and serves to advance that group's cohesion can also repel others (Le Guerer 1992). 'Odour thus becomes an instrument and justification for or the sign of a racial, social and in the end, moral rejection', Le Guerer argues (1992: 27). Others may consider people with repugnant smells as 'skunks' from a sociological point of view. Scent sociologists, Largey and Watson, described what people would do, in general, when they came into contact with a 'skunk':

> If we encounter an individual skunk, e.g., a person with bad breath, it is commonly accepted that we may step back from the person to prevent further violation of our sense of smell. Usually, we mentally label such a person and we may extend our disgust by informing others that the person has a problem. Strangely enough, the person himself is seldom directly confronted about his problem because of the embarrassment it would cause the dishonored self to embarrass the dishonoring One. (Largey and Watson: 316)

Pierluigi Lanfranchi, in his article 'Foetor judaicus: Archaeology of a Prejudice' (2017), discusses notions of the 'Jewish stench', using

as an example a work by the Latin poet Venancius Fortunatus (c. 530–c. 600). In this article, Lanfranchi identifies the sources of what was called 'foetor judaicus' in the Christian and 'pagan' traditions of late antiquity, but which continued down the centuries. Lanfranchi repeats Schopenhauer's unfortunate phrase about Spinoza: 'He speaks as a Jew (...) so that we, who are accustomed to purer and more dignified doctrines, are overwhelmed by the foetor judaicus' (Lanfranchi 2017: 119).

In the scientific climate of the nineteenth century, several attempts were made to provide a 'scientific' explanation for the alleged Jewish stench. The German physician and hygienist Gustav Jäger (1832–1917) developed an elaborate theory of smells related to age, gender, race and even each individual's mental and emotional state. In his book, *Die Entdeckung der Seele* (The Discovery of The Soul), Jäger claimed to be able to easily recognise the smell of a Jew, even in an Aryan with a single drop of Jewish blood in his veins (Jäger 1878, vol. 1, 246–248). In 1890, it was alleged that Jews smelled like garlic, and garlic became a metaphor for anti-Semitism. The odour presumably would vanish after the Jew's conversion and baptism into Christianity.

Juliette Courmont, in her book *L'odeur de l'Ennemi* (The Enemy's Odour) (2010), describes the olfactory stereotype held by the French of the Germans after the First World War. This is evidenced by the rumours and theories that circulated and amplified the concept of the 'German smell'. This work collects evidence of this olfactory intolerance from sources of the time: newspapers, letters and the testimonies of soldiers. From the first year of the War, the French

spread the idea that a foul odour accompanied the German enemy. Following in the troops' wake, it would impregnate places occupied by the Germans far beyond the excrement with which they marked their presence. It would even emanate from their corpses.

Although aberrant, the olfactory denunciation of the enemy was too ubiquitous to be blamed on the bewilderment of a few. Reading intimate writings, correspondence and the press it is clear that the 'German stench' was not a propaganda tool, but an ingrained belief. It was also supported by the scientific world. For example, a recognised doctor, Edgar Bérillon, cited by Lefrère and Berche (2010), interpreted the mystery of the German stench as due to excessive sweating induced by the fear of lack of control of the situation in which they found themselves.

In his article, 'Grease and Sweat: Race and Smell in Eighteenth-Century English Culture', Tullett (2016) argues that the social 'use' of olfactory stereotypes, particularly their links with cosmetics, food and odorous spaces, determines the spread of explanations for and attitudes to racial scent. He argues that race ideas should not be considered static or described in terms of narratives that assume a divide between the body or culture, but that racial stereotypes should be understood as collections of traits, of which smell is one, with different evolutions.

In response to widespread twentieth-century stereotypes about bodily odour, many authors tried to educate readers by giving an objective analysis of the matter. Following the reading of a thesis advocating the notion of differentiation of racial instincts by accepting the

smell, Max Weber (1912) wrote of white Americans who could 'smell the blacks':

> I can refer to my nose: it found no such thing, despite very close contacts. I have the impression that the Negro, when he has neglected to wash, smells exactly like white people and vice versa. In the Southern States, I can also report on the current show of a lady sitting in her cabriolet, the reins in hand, beside a Negro; it is evident that her nose does not suffer. As far as I know, the smell of the Negro is a recent invention of the northern states designed to explain their recent 'distancing' of Negroes (Weber 1912, in Le Breton 2006: 300).

The suggestion that northern states' social 'distancing' of the 'Negroes' was 'recent', that is, in the early twentieth century, indicates that it predated the foul odour attributed to Jews and Germans. Hence, social distancing did not originate only from olfactory stereotypes, but also as a reaction to differences in skin colour. As a result some individuals viewed darker-skinned people as different or even subhuman beings.

The contribution of scientific racism to social distancing from blacks

Racism is an ideology that, starting from the postulate that there are races within the human species, considers specific categories of people as intrinsically superior to others. It is different from racialism, which, although starting from the same postulate, does not consider the races to be unequal. Racism was initially based not on scientific facts, but on Canaan's curse in the Book of Genesis and the 'Table of Peoples' that derives from it.

Racist ideologies have served as a basis for political doctrines that have led to racial discrimination, ethnic segregation and social distancing. Scientific racism has resulted in injustices and violence and, in extreme cases, genocide. According to some sociologists, scientific racism is part of the social domination dynamic.

The supposedly scientific concept of race emerged in the mid-eighteenth century among some naturalists. For the scientists of that time, species were regarded as stable and created by God (fixism). On the other hand, there were 'varieties' within species that were unstable and were distinguished by climate and place. Agronomic practices could also produce these 'varieties'. But how did this explain that man, God's creature, normally stable, possesses variable and transmissible characteristics, such as skin colour? Should they be speaking of human species or human varieties? To answer this question, some scientists, anxious to defend the uniqueness of the human species, would mobilise a new concept, that of 'race'. It would define the stable and hereditary varieties within the human species, which were then detailed and classified.

This idea was supported in France, by Georges-Louis de Buffon, and in Germany, by Friedrich Blumenbach and Emmanuel Kant. It was also accepted in England, by Charles Darwin, the father of the theory of the evolution of species, who used the word 'race' in his seminal work *On the Origin of Species* (1859). For him, species were, in fact, initially races, that is to say, unstable hereditary 'varieties' that were transmitted and fixed through time. To back up their claims, naturalists recorded measurements, of the skull, of facial characteristics, claiming that these

were a scientific method by which human races could be determined and categorised, according to their beauty, and intellectual and moral capacities, etc.

At the start of the study of human genetics, there was an essential current of thought that took up the postulates underlying the racial theories developed by Gobineau (1854) and his contemporaries while integrating advances in the work on natural selection within species. The processes of biological reproduction, already explored in the work of Mendel (1822–1884), were revisited in the light of Darwin's theory of evolution, which held that natural laws of selection allowed the reproduction of the strongest species. In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin proposed—as a starting point for his reflections— the observations of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) on population dynamics. Malthus had claimed that, in all populations, births are far too numerous for the resources available. On the strength of this observation, Darwin theorised that the result was a fierce struggle for life that inexorably favoured those species that possessed the genetic characteristics best adapted to ensure their survival in a given environment.

Darwin's theory would find its social counterpart a few years after its publication. By applying his principles to humans, the proponents of social Darwinism tried to explain the existence of domination and subjugation in Western societies and used it to justify exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, patriarchy and racial segregation, as natural phenomena.

The application of Darwin's theory to the structures of society found a good fit in eugenics, which had its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century, when it was associated with a rereading of Mendel's laws of heredity. The father of modern eugenics was the British physiologist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton defined eugenics as the study of the conditions for maintaining the optimal quality of the human species, examining the 'socially' controllable factors that could raise or lower the racial qualities of future generations, physically and mentally.

In his book, *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Galton proposed to attack recessive genes that carried 'unacceptable' defects and faults to prevent the human gene pool from dying. According to Galton, carriers of these 'bad' genes should be sterilised or prevented from reproducing. Largely tinged with an ethnocentric vision that fitted well with the 'civilising' mission of the great European colonial powers of the time, Galton's theory considered the modern European, which he humbly boasted was one of the most 'accomplished' specimens, as the human being with the best genetic capacities. Based on this observation, he considered the potential of a eugenic programme that would improve the human species.

The acceptance of this idea was remarkably rapid in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, when there was a massive influx of immigrants who came to rebuild their lives in the New World. Wishing to reduce the 'social problems' caused by the increase in population and wanting to protect the specificity of the American genetic heritage, the United States government approved the creation of eugenicist associations as early as the 1920s and passed the Immigration Act in 1924, which severely limited immigration from southern and eastern European countries. Many American states openly adopted eugenic policies, citing, among other things, the 'decline of American intelligence', which was attributed mainly to black immigration from Africa. Thus, as Rifkin and Howard note: 'As a result of systematic and well-coordinated propaganda by eugenics advocates, tens of thousands of American citizens were involuntarily sterilised under various laws enacted by some states in the early years of the century' (Rifkin and Howard 1979: 57). Similar eugenic policies were adopted in Canada (notably in Manitoba and Saskatchewan) and in Europe, mainly in the Scandinavian countries and in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

Racism considers that properties attached to a group are permanent and transmissible, most often biologically. The racist gaze is an activity of categorisation as well as closure of the group in on itself. In 1925, sociologist Emory Bogardus initiated the Social Distance Scale. It was alleged to measure prejudice by asking participants to describe how comfortable they felt interacting with people of another race. It was a reductive attempt to cut the world into ethnic groups. The Social Distance Scale proceeds by taking all the complicated and ambivalent feelings an individual has about members of a social or racial group and assigns a number to those feelings. This number attribution reminds us of how slave-owners marked their chattel slaves with a number on the chest to indicate their ownership. The sad news is that the Social Distance Scale is still used by some social scientists (Waxman 2020).

In his article 'Social Distance and Its Origins', published in the *Journal of Applied Sociology*, Bogardus argues:

The measurement of social distances is to be viewed simply as a means for securing adequate interpretations of the varying degrees and grades of understanding and feeling that exist in social situations. The measurement exercise and its results indicate the main points for an intensive inquiry into human experiences. (Bogardus 1925a: 300)

In a social experiment involving 110 people in the US, one of the first questions Bogardus asked was: 'In how many groupings in our country may the members of any race, as a class, be admitted, as judged by the ratings of the 110 judges using the arithmetic mean?' The interviewees were asked to rank races by number, from which an index to the Social Quality Indexes would be calculated. The results are reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1: Highest and Lowest Social Quality Indexes (Samples)

Highest		Lowest	
Canadians	22.51	Turks	2.91
Scotch-Irish	23.05	Hindus	3.08
English	22.35	Mulattoes	3.62
Scotch	20.91	Koreans	3.54
Irish	19.38	Negroes	3.84

Source: Bogardus 1925a: 306

As could be guessed, 'Negroes' were among the people with the lowest Social Quality Index (3.84), along with Koreans (3.54), Mulattoes (3.62), Hindus (3.08) and Turks (2.91). The highest Social Quality Indexes were attributed to Canadians (22.51), Scotch-Irish (23.05), English (22.35), Scotch (20.91) and Irish (19.38).

The Social Distance Scale corroborates the Western way of subconsciously thinking about identity and inequity with tags, numbers and barcodes. It makes it seem as if people fit neatly into these groups and categories.

Bogardus reported one of his informants' testimony of his childhood experience, which led him to distance himself from black people unconsciously:

> This was the idea I received from my elders and it was one I carried with me when I came to California. Here I found conditions very different. My parents lamented the fact that we would have to sit beside Negroes on streetcars and in theaters. My father declared he would never lower himself to the level of the 'nigger' like the Californians did—he simply could not understand the attitude of the westerner to the Negro. In different places I heard the southerner criticised by the westerner for his 'mistreatment' of the Negro. I was suddenly thrust into a new atmosphere and at first I did not know what to make of it, but gradually my ideas began to change to those of my associates. (Bogardus 1925a: 376)

The relevance of these personal and racial reservations, which so invariably and inevitably spring up to complicate and, to some extent, to fix and 'conventionalise' our spontaneous human relationships, is that they come to be expressed in formal social relations and end up in the political arena to become laws and by-laws.

The Social Distance Scale treats hatred as a simple factor that can be turned into a number, counted and averaged across a population or a race. It is a gross reduction of human nature. We assume that Bogardus wanted to increase understanding between groups. In his second article, 'Social Distance and Its Origins' (1925), he wrote that his experiments 'were conducted to find out just how and why these grades of understanding and intimacy vary' (Bogardus 1925b: 217). We can speculate that Bogardus wanted to do good but without questioning the terms he used and their impact on the people he studied. The number of feet or metres that separate people can indicate the gap between those who are perceived to be good or bad, indispensable or deplorable, prestigious or vulgar. Social distancing is a virulent symptom of the fear of the other.

Scientific racism was dealt a blow when, in June 2000, the geneticist Craig Venter, a pioneer in genome sequencing, cited McCann-Mortimer et al. (2004: 409), announced that 'the concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis'. He proved that the human genome is indeed a composite of many sequences, that individuals have several ethnic origins.

Conclusion

We need to address structural inequalities in this world. Otherwise, the devastation of pandemics now and in the future will be more dreadful. As politicians and scientists urge nations to practise 'social distancing', we should remember that, throughout history, the same concept has made some black people more vulnerable to the physical and economic effects of the coronavirus and other epidemics and disasters.

It is important to be aware of the extent to which institution- and government-sanctioned language may have negative connotations, such as racism. Before popularising words, governments and institutions should assess how these

terms have been used to justify negative social behaviour, such as racism and prejudice against certain social groups. It is crucial to think about terms proposed for everyday use, and educate people about the history of these terms.

The COVID-19 pandemic led public authorities to impose preventive measures such as 'social distancing'. Our research shows that this expression is pejorative in orientation, and loaded with historical racial stigma and discrimination against ethnic groups, and especially black people. Physically distancing ourselves, fostering isolation, erecting a wall, preventing ties and generating fear of the other is what we first think of when we use the term 'social distancing'. If we decide to continue with the concept of 'social distancing', we need to humanise it. Otherwise, we might find ourselves using it as in the past—to categorise, marginalise and exclude.

Acknowledgements

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